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**FAMILY
OF
STRANGERS**

*Building a Jewish Community
in Washington State*

Sephardic Pioneers

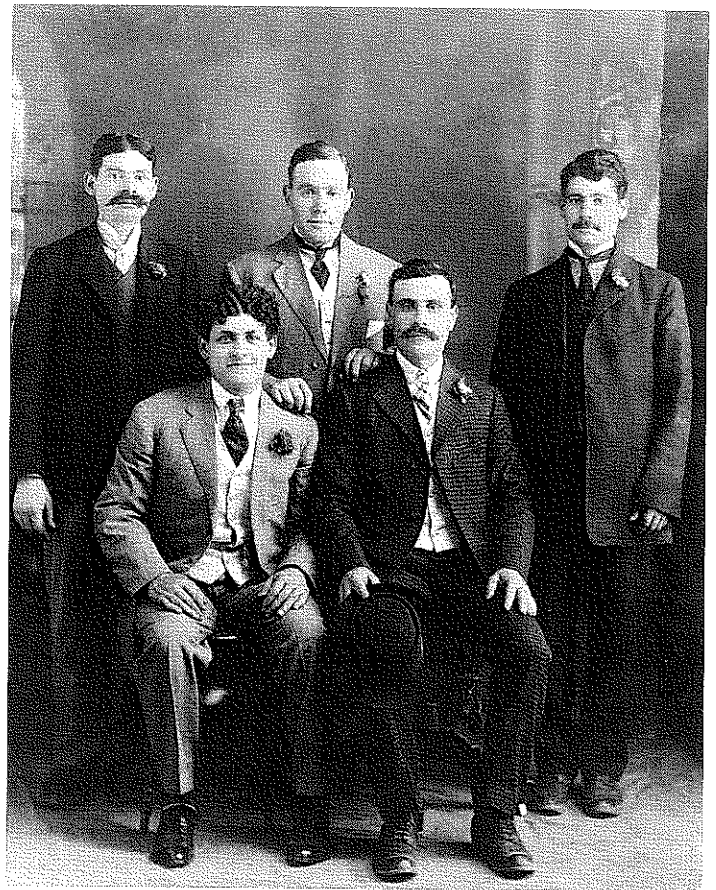
THE FIRST SEPHARDIM TO COME TO SEATTLE, THE inadvertent founders of Seattle's astonishingly large Sephardic community, were two young men who arrived almost by chance in June 1902. They accompanied a Greek friend who was returning to Seattle after a visit to his Mediterranean family. Solomon Calvo and Jacob Policar arrived from the Turkish island of Marmara, wearing *tsizis* (a fringed garment) under their shirts and carrying their prayer books, their *tefillin*, and one change of underwear.¹

Calvo and Policar were the first of the third wave of Jews to Washington State, arriving in Seattle from Turkey and the island of Rhodes. Unable to speak English, and eager to find other Jews, they stood on the waterfront street near a second-hand store saying "Yahudi, Yahudi" ("Jew, Jew"). When a curious crowd gathered around them, thirteen-year-old Jacob Kaplan, who was working in the store, came out to tell them that he, too, was a Jew. He took them to Rabbi Hirsch Genss, who introduced them to members of the Orthodox *shul*.²

Both young men were delighted to find other Jews in Seattle. However, Calvo and Policar were not like any Jews the Seattle Jews had known. Their language sounded strange. While the Jews who had previously settled in Seattle spoke German or Yiddish, the Sephardim spoke Ladino, or more precisely, Judeo-Spanish.³ When, in an effort to prove themselves Jewish, Calvo and Policar read aloud from their prayer books, their pronunciation of Hebrew words was unfamiliar. The puzzled members of Seattle's Ashkenazic community were not entirely convinced that these newcomers were indeed Jews.

Orthodox Gershon Rickles set about to solve the mystery. He wrote to the Jewish community in New York to inquire about these new arrivals, and the reply set everyone's mind at ease.⁴ The two young men were Sephardim, descendants

The first Sephardic Jews to Washington State found little in common with the earlier arriving Ashkenazic Jews. For many years, each group regarded the other as strangers, and intermarriage was frowned upon. Standing: Mushon (Patatel) Eskinazi, Jacob Policar, Moshon Adatto; seated: Solomon Calvo and unidentified individual. MSCUA/UWL, neg. 1084.



of Jews who had been expelled from Spain in 1492. Sephardim were among the first settlers to America in the seventeenth century. The Sephardim coming to America at the beginning of the twentieth century, like Calvo and Policar, came from the lands of the Ottoman Empire, where Jews had been severely affected by rising Turkish and other nationalism in the Balkans and precarious economic circumstances. They came to the United States seeking political and religious freedom as well as economic opportunities.⁵

Satisfied that the two young men from Marmara were as Jewish as himself, Rabbi Hirsch Genss found a place for Calvo and Policar to live, and work for them to do. Late in the fall of 1903, David Levy, another Sephardic Jew from Marmara, arrived. The first thing he did was go to the waterfront and take a deep breath of the salty Puget Sound air which, he said, "was just like Marmara."⁶

The three Sephardic young men, uncomfortable because their lack of Yiddish cut them off from many of their Jewish neighbors, spent much of their spare time at a Greek coffee house, chatting with Greek acquaintances, eating Greek food, and drinking Turkish coffee. It was at this coffee house, in 1904, that Calvo, Policar, and Levy met Nessim Alhadeff, the first immigrant to Seattle from the



Nessim Alhadeff, the first Jew from the island of Rhodes to settle in Seattle, and his wife, Rosa, also from Rhodes. Nessim established a large retail and wholesale fish business, which provided employment for his brothers and other immigrants who followed him. WSJHS, 191.

Greek island of Rhodes. By 1906 there were eighteen Sephardim in Seattle—seventeen bachelors and Dorah Levy, the first young Sephardic woman to arrive.⁷

The arrival of eighteen-year-old Dora Levy bewildered Rabbi Hirsch Genss. Muttering in Yiddish to his wife, he wondered what they were going to do with a young Sephardic girl among all those Sephardic men. Speaking in Yiddish that was as clear as Genss's, Levy interrupted. She wanted to get a job, she said. She had no intention of depending on other Sephardim, and she planned to live in a hotel until she could find a permanent residence.⁸ The rabbi and his wife listened to the flood of Yiddish in astonishment. "Here is a Yidenah!" the rabbi said

Harry Policar (front row, center) was the first Sephardic boy born in Washington State. His father and mother, Isaac and Calo Policar, are seated behind him, and his siblings, Sultana and Morris, are on either side of him. Sol and Ralph Policar are in top row. MSCUA/UWI., neg. 10432.



in delight. Levy's knowledge of Yiddish was certainly unusual for a Sephardic Jew. Born in Istanbul, Levy received her education at the Scotch Missionary School, where she learned English, French, German, history, mathematics, geography, and literature. She knew Spanish because it was spoken at home, and Turkish since it was the native language. The Yiddish she picked up from her family's Ashkenazic neighbors.⁹

In Seattle, the Sephardic "Yidenah" soon proved her worth. She had no trouble finding work, and when other Sephardic women came to Seattle, she was their lifeline, acting as an interpreter because none of them could speak either English or Yiddish. In 1910, Dorah Levy became Mrs. Asher Cohen.¹⁰

The Newcomers

This young group of Seattle immigrants, which included such surnames as Alhadeff, Calvo, Policar, Peha, Hazan, Israel, Eskenazy, and Benezra, became the nucleus of Seattle's Sephardim. Among them were Sephardi from Istanbul and Rodosto, as well as from Rhodes and Marmara.

Esther Adatto, the first Sephardic bride, married David Levy in 1907 in a ceremony performed by Rabbi Hirsch Genss in his home. The first Seattle-born Sephardi was Aaron Policar (1908). Fortuna Calvo, the first Sephardic girl born in Seattle, remembered her father standing with her on the shore of Lake Washington when she was a small child and pointing to Mercer Island. "See across there?" he said. "That's Marmara!"¹¹

It was the Alhadeffs who soon constituted the largest family unit in the Sephardic community. Nessim Alhadeff worked for a while for his Greek friends in their small fruit, vegetable, and fish stalls, then created a delivery business, delivering fresh fish to restaurants from Everett to Renton, riding on the Interurban railway. He opened the Palace Market in about 1907. One by one he brought his seven brothers, a sister, and his mother and father to Seattle, and brought Rosa Israel from Rhodes to Seattle as his bride. "He helped finance the bringing over of many, many of the Sephardic community of Rhodes," said his son Charles.

My father was seventeen when he arrived in Seattle [1904]. When he left the island of Rhodes, all he came with was a shopping bag of food and a big huge quilt that all the mothers would sew for their children. Each child got a quilt.

—Leni Peha LaMarche, MSCUA/UWL, 3452

My father and Mr. Nhimas left Turkey because they didn't want to go into the Turkish Army. They hid in a boat in the coal bins. After the ship departed from Istanbul, they paid the purser for their passage and arrived in New York in January of 1907. Knowing that there were some Sephardic men here in Seattle, they took the train and came to Seattle. We arrived, my mother, my uncle Joe Cohen, and myself as a baby, six months later. I was nine months of age, the first Sephardic girl brought over from the old country to Seattle.

—Rebecca Moshcatel, MSCUA/UWL, 2137-001

Developing his fish business (which eventually became the Palace Fish and Oyster Company), Nessim provided work for everyone he helped bring to Seattle, including two brothers-in-law. "He was a bit of a philosopher," recalled Charles. "He often used to say to us that if he never left us anything in life except a good name . . . we could get along."¹²

Within a few years after the first arrivals, about forty Sephardic families had settled in Seattle.¹³ (Only a few Sephardim first settled outside of Seattle. Centralia's early Jewish community included Sephardim who sold fish, fruits, and vegetables. After a time, they forsook their businesses in Centralia to settle with their families in Seattle.)

The early Sephardim in Seattle were augmented in 1909 when Bechor Chiprut, living in the village of Tekirdag (Turkish for Rodosto) in mainland Turkey, arrived with seventy young Sephardim fleeing conscription into the Turkish army.¹⁴ But not all immigrants heading for Washington State had a clear picture of their exact destination. Jacob Aroghetti, living in Rhodes, campaigned for emigration and made plans for himself and for a group of companions to follow his fellow Sephardim to Seattle. Arriving in New York, he carefully bought tickets

Many of Washington's immigrants arrived not only without money, but "often with personal belongings consisting only of the clothes they wore," said Jack Caston, who reached Seattle in 1911 from Turkey with his parents and two brothers. "It was the accepted custom among our small Sephardic community that no home was ever too small to accommodate new arrivals."

—Jack Caston, "Pioneers Made Needed Sacrifices," *The Seattle Times*, undated clipping in Moshcatel papers, MSCUA/UWL, 2137-001

and boarded the train—to Washington, D.C. Searching in vain for his Seattle friends, he finally discovered his mistake. Not willing to risk any more travel, Aroghetti settled in New York.¹⁵

The Ashkenazim in Seattle didn't know what to make of this fast growing group of Jews who smoked water pipes, drank Turkish coffee, and were so different from them. "My father," David Genss said, "often remarked that these Turks were more religious and devout than the Ashkenazim—he called them 'Turkishe Yiden.'"¹⁶

By 1913, six hundred Sephardim constituted Seattle's Judeo-Spanish colony, the largest number of Sephardim in any U.S. city outside of New York. (San Francisco and Atlanta each had a hundred.)¹⁷ During immigration, a number of Turkish Sephardim came to Seattle through the office of the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society. The overthrow of Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid and



Ashkenazic Seattle Jews didn't know what to make of the fast-growing group of Sephardim who smoked water pipes, drank Turkish coffee, and made buñuclos (a sort of donut without a hole, dipped in oil, fried and served with sugar and honey) instead of potato latkes on Hanukkah. MSCUA/UWL, neg. 15643.

It was June 6, 1909, the year of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition when David Mossafer, a native of the island of Rhodes, arrived in Seattle. After going from New York to relatives in Alabama, nineteen-year-old Mossafer had traveled across the country on the train and saw, for the first time, a Chinese person, and the wonder of falling snow. With a new feeling of worldliness, Mossafer demanded nickels instead of dimes in the change received from his first purchase in Seattle. The nickels were larger, therefore he surmised, they were worth more.

—From transcript of David Mossafer, MSCUA/UWL, 1742

the end of World War I brought hundreds more to Seattle—until the change in U.S. immigration rules in 1924 cut off all immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. By the time the post-World War I immigration laws of the United States went into effect, the Seattle Sephardic community numbered over three thousand. They were among the twenty to twenty-five thousand Sephardic Jews settling in America coming primarily from Turkey, Greece, and Syria.¹⁸

Working Toward Prosperity

Like Nessim Alhadeff, Seattle's Sephardim quickly gravitated to the fish and produce trade, although there is little evidence that any of them had experience in these fields in Turkey or Rhodes. Solomon Calvo peddled fish from a cart for several years before opening Waterfront Fish and Oyster Company. Morris Hanan and others worked in the Pike Place Public Market, opening produce stalls, fish markets, and restaurants. Marco Franco operated produce stands in the Market from about 1911 to 1938, first with Herman Kronfeld, and then with his brother-in-law David Mossafer. (A few Sephardic-owned Public Market businesses remain today.) Israel Fis came to Seattle from Rhodes in 1914, worked in the Market for other Sephardic merchants, and opened the Palace Grocery at Fourteenth Avenue and East Spruce Street in 1922.¹⁹ Many worked as bootblacks, shoe repairmen, and barbers. A few bootblacks, such as Sabitai Naon, saved enough to open shoe stores. Generally, this immigrant generation of Sephardim labored long hours for little pay, and many families lived in poverty through the Great Depression.

One of the exceptional Sephardic entrepreneurs was Sam Israel, who arrived in Seattle in 1919 at age twenty, never married, and accumulated a fortune by putting his earnings into buying buildings and land. Described as short, stout, excitable, and intolerant of anything bureaucratic, Israel bought his first building

in the 1930s with savings earned from making and repairing shoes. After World War II, with profits made on a boot-repair contract with the U.S. Army, he started to buy real estate. During the next fifty years, this immigrant shoemaker from the island of Rhodes accumulated more than five hundred properties. They ranged over the entire state and included commercial buildings, home sites, wheat fields, orchards, ranches, and timber stands. He owned more than forty properties in Seattle, fourteen of them in Pioneer Square, and great stretches of land in eastern Washington.²⁰

After World War II, he moved into a house on ranch property he owned overlooking Soap Lake. It included a vinyl sofa, a plastic table, and a few kitchen chairs. Although Israel could afford to live in luxurious style, he saw little need to augment his furnishings. Twenty years later he was still living in the house and still buying land, renting out the buildings he owned, and seldom selling anything. Often called a miserly landlord who never put any money into maintaining the building space he rented out, Sam Israel first made headlines in 1942 with a donation to



Sephardic immigrants first worked as bootblacks and did other manual labor. Many later went into shoe repair and the retail and wholesale shoe trade. Top row: Sam Amon and unidentified individual; first row: unidentified individual, Raltamin Calderon, Edward Tarica, Ralph Policar, Alvert Ovadia, and Isaac Eskenazi. MSCUA/UWL, neg. 143.



Solomon Calvo, Solti Levy, and a Greek friend in front of the Waterfront Fish and Oyster Company, ca. 1912. MSCUA/UWL, neg. 1092.

a wartime rubber drive of six tons of heels collected through his repair business. He made headlines again at his death in 1994 at age ninety-five, bequeathing the greater part of his \$100 million estate to causes that had to do with ecology, Jewish life, and Jewish education.²¹

Like many of the Ashkenazim who preceded them, the Sephardim brought few resources other than their Jewish traditions, their sense of adventure, their capacity for long hours of hard work, and their hopes. David Behar described his Seattle antecedents this way: "That first generation of Sephardim in Seattle came from a Mediterranean culture, dominated by Islam yet scrupulously Jewish, a society whose form was not unlike the Spanish communities of their ancestors."²² This description concurs with the reflection of community historian Albert Adatto, who suggested in a thesis written in 1939: "If Columbus were to return to life and live among the Seattle Sephardim he would be able to talk with them in an intelligible

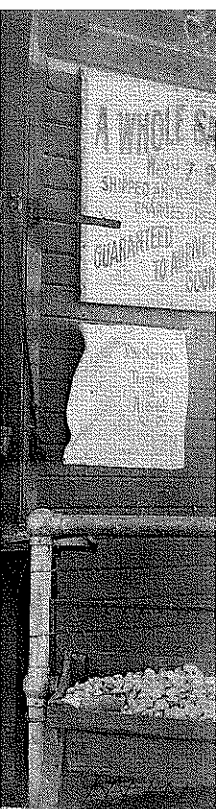
manner." Despite their four-century stopover in Turkey and Greece, "Columbus would find there existed a greater temperamental affinity with these Sephardim than any group of modern Spaniards."²³

Foundation for a New Generation

The timing of arrival of the three waves of immigrants—German-speaking Central European, Yiddish-speaking Eastern European, and Ladino-speaking Sephardim—profoundly affected their respective economic development. The earliest to arrive in Washington Territory had a wide-open frontier economy to work in, with great opportunity for gain and an equal opportunity for failure. By the time of statehood in 1889, many had been in Washington for more than three decades and in the United States for even longer. Several of their business enterprises evolved from small beginnings to large, complex concerns over a period of many years.

The Eastern European Jews, who began coming to Washington in significant numbers after the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1883, found a more developed, but still young, economy. The Alaska-Yukon gold rush and World War I boosted the state's economy, allowing some of these pioneers to establish firm beginnings for their enterprises. But it took decades for most to achieve economic stability.

The Sephardim who came after the turn of the century, and most after World War I, shared the same economic difficulties as the Eastern European immigrants. While a few of the Sephardic immigrants achieved business success relatively early, within ten or fifteen years of settling in Seattle, most of the immigrant generation of Sephardim lacked the skills or resources to achieve more than a bare subsistence. It was the children of the Sephardic immigrants, sustained by the sacrifices of their parents, who would gain economic success in Washington. By the 1990s, Sephardic Jews were included among Seattle's wealthiest families. When the city's new symphony hall was opened in 1998, it was named in honor of its largest benefactor, the Benaroya family.



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Unity, Diversity, and Friction

THE THREE WAVES OF WASHINGTON IMMIGRANTS FROM Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean areas, part of the worldwide family of Jews, were a family of strangers in Washington State. Although diversity existed in Jewish communities throughout America, in Washington State, with its small Jewish population remote from established Jewish centers, the frictions arising from diversity were acute. Religious, cultural, and social divisions continued to separate the Central European from the Eastern European Jews, and both of them from the Mediterranean Jews, through more than half of the twentieth century.

In Seattle, for example, the longer-established, prosperous German-speaking Jews found it hard not to look down their noses at the Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europeans. "I would be much more blunt and frank and say there was a wall between the German Jews and others," admitted Morton Schwabacher.¹ The Eastern European Jews, in turn, viewed the Central Europeans from a cautious distance. They called them the "*Daitschen*," Yiddish for Germans, not so much out of respect (although there was that, too) as from suspicion. On the other hand, they didn't hesitate to look down their own noses at the Ladino-speaking Sephardim.² And although Leni Peha LaMarche recalled that her mother "always felt kindly" towards the Ashkenazim, she said, "We knew we couldn't get along together. . . . They had a different type of a culture, so different."³

Divisions within Ashkenazim

In Washington State, as in Oregon, California, or almost every other region, the differences between German-speaking and Yiddish-speaking immigrant Jews

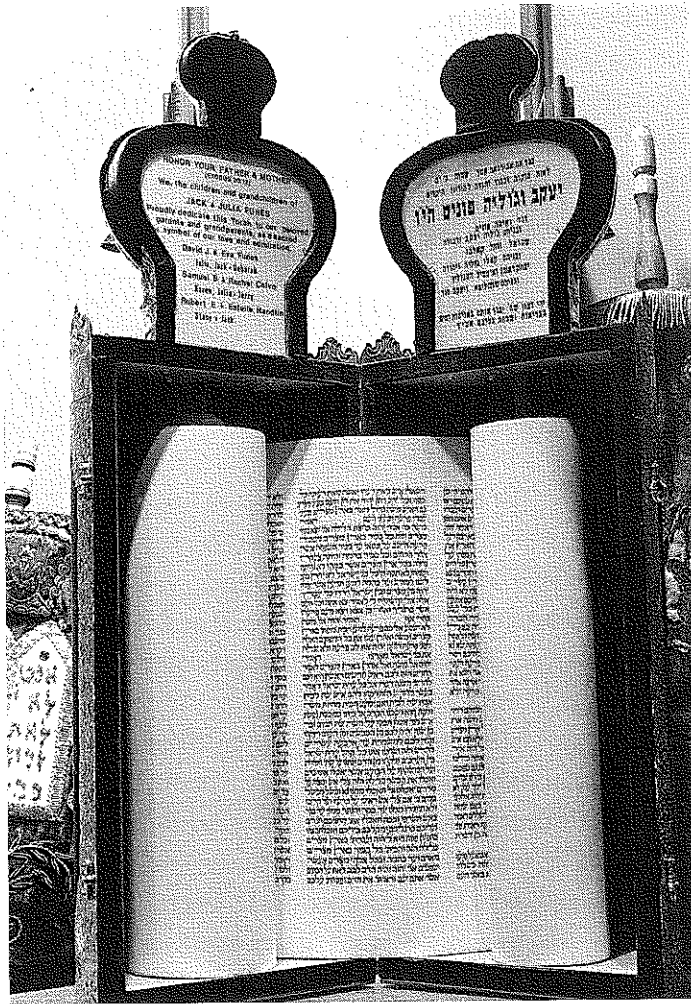
went beyond language. Central Europeans, after decades in the United States, practiced Reform Judaism, and the Eastern Europeans were mainly Orthodox in the immigrant generation. Yet both were part of the Ashkenazic culture.

In Tacoma, where no Sephardim settled, the Jewish community was divided between those Jews who had come from the various German states and established a house of worship they referred to as temple, and those from the Russian areas, who formed their own house of worship which they called *shul*. Despite this separation, Morris Kleiner, a leader among Tacoma's Jews, recalled that everyone in the Jewish community "mingled." A kindly and caring man, Kleiner, who arrived in Tacoma in 1914 and established the beginnings of a three-generation lumber business, joined both temple and shul and participated in fund-raising and activities of both. Much of the mingling he referred to occurred among the lodge members of the B'nai B'rith, which drew from both houses of worship. However, not many of the *shul*-going, Russian-background group were "close" to the *Daitshen* or German-background temple group—even though a few, like Morris Kleiner, were reluctant to see any separation at all. Each "kept to themselves" in some degree in their social lives as well as in their religious lives. In those early years, most Jewish Tacomans simply accepted such divisions as inevitable.⁴

Like Tacoma, Spokane in its early years also found itself with two distinct Jewish communities. Betty Meyersberg, daughter of Harry Rosenhaupt, described the feeling "between the temple kids and the synagogue kids" as "very bristly." "The synagogue people didn't consider us as knowledgeable Jews and they let us know it."⁵ Pearl Duitch Singer, whose mother was brought to Fargo, North Dakota, at age sixteen by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society with part of her family in 1909, and who moved from there to Spokane, agreed. "Usually there was a big distinction between people at the shul and at the temple. In later years, some families were members of both. . . ." As in Tacoma, the "meeting ground" was the B'nai B'rith.⁶

Divisions between Ashkenazim and Sephardim

Differences between the two mainstream Jewish cultures, Ashkenazim (which included both Central and Eastern European Jews) and Sephardim (those from the Mediterranean regions) went beyond both language and religious practices. While the content of the religion was the same for Ashkenazim and Sephardim, their liturgies and sacred tunes, as well as their pronunciation of Hebrew, were not. In addition, their customs differed, as did their cuisine. Ashkenazim cooked in the style of Germany, Poland, or Russia, and the Sephardim in the style of Mediterranean



The heart of every temple and synagogue, whether Ashkenazic or Sephardic, is the Torah, the first five books of Moses hand-printed in Hebrew on a parchment scroll. In contrast to the silk or velvet covering of a Torah scroll in an Ashkenazic sanctuary, a Torah in a Sephardic synagogue is traditionally cradled within a decorated shell of wood. This one in the Bikur Holim Synagogue was a gift from the Funes children in the name of their parents and pioneer grandparents, Jack and Julia Funes. Museum of History and Industry, Seattle.

countries. While such foods as gefilte fish, tzimmes, or kreplach were "Jewish" to the Ashkenazim, such foods as *borekas*, *bolemas*, and

huevos haminados were "Jewish" to the Sephardim. Under the law which prohibited cooking on the Sabbath, Orthodox Jews developed certain dishes which could be precooked and kept warm. Ashkenazim prepared *cholent* (a combination of beans, barley, and meat) for the next day's Sabbath meal, and the Sephardim made *haminero* (a vegetable stew with whole eggs roasted inside).⁷

Ashkenazic women gasped when they glimpsed Sephardic men on the Sabbath smoking "those things with the water underneath, and the wives sitting on the floor."⁸ For prayer, Ashkenazim went to temple or to *shul*, while Sephardim went to *kehila* or *kal*. Ashkenazim named their newborn infants after a deceased grandparent or relative, and the Sephardim, after a living grandparent or relative. When an Ashkenazic grandmother rocked a cradle, she crooned about raisins and almonds. When a Sephardic grandmother sang, she gave voice to romance bal-

lads, the preserved songs of her ancestors. Such differences didn't make for easy relationships. "They're Jews and we're Jews, we just didn't get along," recalled Esther Borish Friedman, a turn-of-the-century Seattle resident of Russian origin.⁹

In Seattle, where Washington Sephardim were concentrated, many young Sephardic Jews grew up in an essentially Ashkenazic environment while remaining totally Sephardic at home and in their synagogues. Many simply accepted and took for granted the differences they encountered everyday in their neighborhood and among their classmates.

Marc D. Angel described growing up Sephardic in Seattle this way:

The Sephardim formed an island within the general Jewish community with only a few bridges linking them with the Ashkenazim. In those early days, the two communities developed along their own lines, almost oblivious of the other's existence, except for some minor taunting.

Angel's mother remembered Ashkenazic kids yelling "Mazola" at the Sephardim who cooked with olive or other vegetable oils. In response, Sephardic kids would shout back "schmaltz," chicken fat, a staple in Ashkenazic cooking.¹⁰

Angel's grandparents, originally from the island of Rhodes and towns near Istanbul in Turkey, came to the United States in the first decade of the 1900s. His parents, both of whom were born in Seattle, spoke and sang in Judeo-Spanish. "They might just as well have spent their childhoods in Turkey or Rhodes," said Angel. "My mother Rachel, the daughter of Marco and Sultana Romey, did not learn English until she entered public school. My father Victor, who began violin lessons as a young boy, was ultimately forced to give up the violin because he was not learning to play 'our' music."

Angel, who grew up to become Rabbi Marc D. Angel of Congregation Shearith Israel Synagogue in New York, the oldest still-existent synagogue in the United States, summed up his early years in Seattle by stating, "It is not easy for a Sephardic Jew to maintain his identity. Being a Jew, he is a minority among Americans. Being a Sephardi, he is a minority among Jews."¹¹

"For many, many years I felt a little estranged from the other Jewish community," recalled Charles Alhadeff. "My mother and father were not socially involved with anybody outside of the Sephardic community or my family. . . ." Of his childhood living on the fringe of the Ashkenazic Jewish neighborhood, Alhadeff said, "We were not integrated and then there was an underlying feeling as between the Sephardic Jews, the Ashkenazic Jews, and the so called German Jews. . . . I didn't know them and they didn't know me." Within a few weeks after Alhadeff and his friend John Franco joined the German-Jewish dominated Zeta Beta Tau

fraternity at the University of Washington in 1926, each was visited by the fraternity president and de-pledged. "The feeling being that we, being Sephardics, were not welcome," observed Alhadeff.¹²

Dating between a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi was forbidden in many Seattle families during Alhadeff's and Franco's college years and for some time beyond. Marriage between the two groups was frowned upon by both sides. In the 1930s, Charles Alhadeff's marriage to Doris Kessler, an Ashkenazic Jew, was one of the very first "intermarriages" in the Jewish faith in the Seattle area. "It was a rather traumatic time for my family at that time . . . they didn't know about the other side of the fence except that they were Jews," observed Alhadeff.¹³

Divisions within Sephardim

Cultural prejudices persisted not only between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, but also within the Sephardic community. Like the two differing groups of Ashkenazim, Sephardim from the Marmara group and those from Rhodes remained divided when they arrived in Seattle. A union between a Sephardic Jew from Rhodes and a Sephardic Jew from Marmara was considered intermarriage. Such attitudes were not at all unusual, said Rabbi Marc D. Angel. His father's family was from the island of Rhodes, his mother's from Rodosto, on the shores of the Sea of Marmara. Long after his parents married, some of the older Rhodes immigrants continued to refer to his mother as *ajena*, which means foreigner.¹⁴

The Sephardim from Marmara and those from Rhodes represented two patterns of culture, differing to some degree in liturgical practices, language, and customs. Until they met in Seattle, the Sephardim from Rhodes had almost no contact with the Marmara Sephardim. In Seattle they continued to maintain their differences, each group feeling "more comfortable" with their own people.¹⁵

The Invisible Bond

Despite the marked differences between the two mainstream Jewish cultures and the separations within both the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim, the tradition of "Klal Yisrael" (peoplehood), the spiritual connection of every Jew to every other Jew, created an invisible bond that could not be ignored. Although they were divided by religious, cultural, and social differences, the Jews of Washington, as Jews did in other parts of the country, came to each other's aid when aid was needed. For example, predominantly Reform volunteers from the National Council of Jewish Women Seattle Section's Settlement House helped the Orthodox "green-

horns" learn English and become more Americanized. They continued to help even when it was occasionally whispered that some did so more to preserve their own image among the gentiles than out of the goodness of their hearts.

During the Klondike gold rush of 1898, Jewish prospectors who returned to Seattle penniless and ill received help from their co-religionists in making a new start. Jewish immigrants fleeing Eastern Europe through Harbin, China, and landing in Seattle found hospitable Jews waiting. When a ship sailed into Seattle carrying immigrants from Russia, Julius Shafer could be seen standing on the dock to pay the landing fee required of disembarking Jewish families.¹⁶ Herman "Pop" Kessler, another early Orthodox leader, aided Russian newcomers by taking them to the German Jew Jacob Furth, who owned Puget Sound National Bank, to borrow needed money to start a business, often with little collateral of any kind. Jacob Buttnick, an early Ashkenazic pioneer, often acted in the role of counselor to Sephardim who didn't trust banks, holding their money for them.¹⁷ When the Sephardic community began to scramble for funds to build their Orthodox Ezra Bessaroth Synagogue, Temple De Hirsch Jews stepped forward to help. Their support enabled the fledgling congregation to raise enough funds to build its first sanctuary at Fifteenth and Fir Street. Noted Albert Franco, Seattle attorney and community activist, "Socially and economically they were so far above us," yet they helped, and they helped generously.¹⁸

Sephardic Jews also encountered financial difficulty while constructing their new synagogue, Bikur Holim, at the beginning of the Great Depression, and stood in danger of losing the property. A committee of temple Jews, Nathan Eckstein, J. R. Hiller, and Alfred Shemanski (a member of both temple and synagogue), investigated the matter and sent an urgent appeal to "a certain group of men with foresight":

[T]hey well deserve and must have the whole-hearted interest and support of the Jewish Community. To aid them in their sad situation it is imperative that the sum of \$2000.00 be raised immediately. . . . These people, whose purpose in erecting this synagogue was so noble, who are so bravely struggling in the world for better life, must not find us lacking in their need now.¹⁹

Aubrey Levy (of the Cooper-Levy family), one of the "hatless Jews," as the Sephardim often called Reform Jews, became in effect the Sephardim's mentor. A lawyer, and fluent in the Spanish language, he helped them to negotiate the purchase of the Orthodox Ashkenazic Bikur Cholim synagogue building for their Sephardic Bikur Holim, and drew up their Spanish-written constitution. Levy, one of the rare non-Sephardim considered an honorary member of Seattle's Sephardic

community, helped many to obtain citizenship papers and performed pro bono much of the legal work in the early Sephardic community.²⁰

The practice of Jews helping newly arrived Jews, regardless of their dissimilarity, has continued from the early waves of immigration to the present day in towns and cities throughout Washington State.

The three early waves of Jewish immigrants to Washington State brought with them their unique strengths and identities. In preserving their differences, they did not easily form a cohesive community. Differences arising from geographical, environmental, and historical processes were not easily dissolved. More than two generations would pass before some of the old divisions would fade.